

*Living in Other Times*

# FACTORY CHILDREN



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*Factory Children*

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## *Living in Other Times* **Factory Children**

Towards the end of the eighteenth century England began to change from an agricultural country to an industrial one. This period is known as the Industrial Revolution.

Many new inventions made it possible to produce goods much faster and more cheaply than by the old methods. At first water was used for power, but the development of the steam engine made it the chief source of power. Steam needs coal and at first factories grew up in areas where coal could be easily obtained. The coming of the railways made it possible to carry coal to other places and so enabled factories to be built in many parts of England.

As the factories were built, so houses were built as quickly and cheaply as possible close to the factories. These houses were ugly to look at. They had no bath-rooms, or even water taps, and their only light came from oil lamps or candles.

The Higgins family live in such a house in a small back street of a northern town. Their life is a very hard one. Their home is dirty and overcrowded. Mother and father both go out to work in nearby factories. Two of the children are also at work. All around their home are hundreds of other houses just like theirs, built back to back in ugly terraces and courts.



People worked for very long hours in the factories. Work usually started at half-past five in the morning and went on until half-past eight at night. In the winter these factory workers never saw daylight. They stumbled home, weary, and too tired to care about anything except food and sleep.



Albert, the nightwatchman, is patrolling the streets of the town. It is his duty to shout the time and the state of the weather as he goes on his rounds.

He stops outside the Higgins' home and shouts: "Five o'clock on a fine morning and all's well."

Inside the house father, mother and the children are roused from sleep and are preparing for the day.

At this time there were very few schools in England for ordinary children. Even if there had been, they would have found it very difficult to find pupils since in almost every working family the children went out to work.

In South Wales some children went to work in the coal mines at the age of four. Other children went to work at the age of five or six and until 1870 almost every child would be at work at the age of eight.

The Higgins family hurry down to breakfast. Heavy-eyed, they sit down to a meal of bread, cheese and tea. They have not much time or money to spend on food.

People worked in the factories for six full days a week.





Men usually worked eleven hours each day, but women and children were only expected to work ten hours. If, as sometimes happened, they had a Saturday off from work, they had to make up for this lost time by working even longer on the other five days.

Father, mother, Harry and Grace set off for work through the cobbled streets. Father and Harry work in a cotton mill while mother and Grace work at the shipyard. Both are near the river. They carry their food with them—to eat during the long hours of work.

As the factories increased, more and more workers



were needed. Many of the leaders of the churches realised that children should go to school and not to factories. But there were few schools and teachers.

A system called the Monitorial System was started by Joseph Lancaser and Andrew Bell. Under this system the older boys, or monitors, first learned the lesson from the teacher and, when they could repeat it word for word, they were sent out to teach the other children. In this way one or two teachers served a whole school.

Bill, the younger boy, goes to the Church School. This is one long room. The teacher sits at a high desk in the middle, while the monitors teach little groups scattered throughout the room.

From the southern States of America ships came to



England with loads of cotton. This cotton, picked largely by slaves, whose working conditions were similar to those in the factories, could be produced cheaply and sent to England for making into material. Lancashire became the centre of the world's cotton manufacture. The steam engine which gave power to the factories also gave power to the ships. Slowly, but surely, the great sailing-ships were being turned into steamships.

Outside the shipyard where Mrs. Higgins and Grace



work, the work-people are entering the gates. The tops of the ships' masts can be seen above the quayside buildings. Many of these ships are now used to carry coal from the coalfields to ports around the coast. Grace and her mother work at making and mending sails, for sails are still needed even on the steamships.

The day's work starts in the textile factory where Harry



works. The children are being given their jobs by the overseer or foreman, who does not hesitate to use a stick or a strap on some poor child who is slow in setting about his task.

The children's first job was to sweep the floors and pick up the cotton waste. Then they carried bales of raw cotton to the spinning-machines, having sometimes to dodge under dangerous and unguarded machinery on the way. It was not unknown for one of them to be caught up in the machinery and either killed or maimed for life. The small size of the children enabled them to do all sorts of jobs and to get in all sorts of places which would be impossible for grown-ups. For their sixty hours of hard work the young boys like Harry earned about four shillings a week.





Many poor or orphan children were placed in the care of the parish. The parish often had too little room, and too little money to care for them. These children lived in workhouses and as soon as they were old enough, they were sold in large numbers to the owners of cotton mills for whom they had to work until they were twenty-one.

It was not surprising that many of these poor wretches ran away or tried to run away. When this happened, reward notices were posted for the return of the boys, just as reward notices are posted for criminals to-day.

Some of these pauper apprentices are being brought by the master of the

workhouse before the owner of the factory where Harry works.

The longer and the faster the machines could be kept running, the more money they made for their owners. Each boy or girl is ordered to work as hard as possible.

There is no rest for the pauper children. The factory master wastes no time in putting them to work with Harry





and the others. When their daily work is done they go to bed on the factory floor.

From time to time the government tried to improve conditions in the factories. In 1833 factory inspectors were first appointed to visit factories and point out dangerous machinery and bad conditions and to see that the factory owners did something about them.

On this day the factory inspector is visiting Harry's factory. He is looking at a large unguarded flywheel which was the cause of a very bad accident to one of the boys some time ago.

The inspector points to the flywheel and tells the mill manager that he must put a shield round the wheel.

The manager promises to think about the matter, but as soon as the inspector has gone he says to his assistant:

"Factory inspectors indeed! As if we have nothing else to think about but the safety of our work-people!"



The factory is powered by steam-engines. These engines are very powerful and drive endless pulleys all over the factory so that the spinning and weaving machines can be kept busy.

The steam-engines obtain their power from great boilers heated by furnaces. It is the job of Harry's father to stoke these furnaces. It is a very hard job and because of the great heat he works stripped to the waist. As he opens the great heavy iron door of the furnace, a searing, blinding light comes forth from the furnace. Harry's father must heap on more and more fuel in order that the steam pressure may be kept up.





Although Bill does not go out to work like his brother and sister, he too does his best to add to the family income by doing odd jobs for the grocer. Sometimes he helps to load the donkey-cart. For this work he may only receive a few pennies, but every penny is precious to his father and mother.

It is very late when he reaches home for the evening meal.

As the number of people increased, the amount of food for them became less, for workers were leaving the land to go to the factories. Meat was very expensive because people could only buy English meat and as this became more scarce, so the price rose. It was not until many years later, when the colonies of Australia and New Zealand and other countries like the Argentine began to send meat to England, that meat became plentiful and cheap in the shops.

The family gathers for the evening meal. This consists of soup, with a piece of fat pork in it for flavouring. The Higgins family can afford meat only once a week and this is reserved for Sundays, the only day in the week when the whole family are at home.





There were very few parks and playing-fields. The children's main playground was the street in which they lived.

It is Sunday and the children make the most of their holiday. The girls skip in their long dresses, while the boys practise bare-fist boxing. Father smokes his clay pipe as he watches the children at play. Both father and the boys wear long narrow trousers which to-day we call "drain-pipes".



There was no proper water supply to these crowded terraced houses and often one stand pipe had to supply a whole street. The water supplied was not always fit to drink and many people died from diseases carried in impure water. As water was so scarce, it could not be wasted on such things as cleaning and washing. Sometimes the water supply in the stand pipe lasted only for half an hour, and some householders did not get any water at all and were forced to go to their more fortunate neighbours for a drink and water for cooking.

Grace and her mother go to the stand pipe that supplies the water to all the houses in the terrace. They must get their supply in buckets to last them for the evening and the next morning.





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The children of the Higgins family all have to share one bed, but they are too tired to bother much about their comfort. In the rickety iron bed the children huddle together for warmth under the thin coverings. Soon they are asleep and all too soon another day begins with its long round of hard work in the dismal factory.



## QUESTIONS AND THINGS TO DO

1. Make a list of all the things you do not like about the life which the Higgins family had to live.
2. Find out how many hours people usually work in factories to-day and compare this with the days of the early factories.
3. Compare the school which Bill went to with your own. What are the differences?
4. Describe the kind of work that Harry did.
5. Make a drawing of the Higgins' house or the inside of a factory.
6. What did the factory inspector do?
7. See if you can find any description of a workhouse in Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. After you have read it, make your own drawing of it.
8. Where did Grace and her mother get their water for the house? How much water do you think a family would need for one day for drinking and washing?
9. What food did the Higgins family eat? Why did they have meat only once a week?
10. Why do you think all the houses in the factory towns were built close together?
11. What was the great invention that brought these factories into being? Who was the man most connected with it?
12. Why did the Churches start to build schools? Do you think the factory owners were pleased? If not, why?
13. Why were children so useful in the factories?
14. Ask your teacher to read you Charles Dickens's description of "Coketown" in *Hard Times*. Do you think it is a good one?
15. Dramatise the family's evening meal. Let each person tell something that has happened during the day's work.



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